

**Testimony of Courtney Chasse on behalf of Hope and Justice Project  
In Support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services  
March 19, 2025**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Courtney Chasse, the Executive Director of Hope and Justice Project in Aroostook County. I am writing on behalf of Hope and Justice Project, in support of LD 875 and the need for funding for essential services for victims of domestic violence in Maine.

Hope and Justice Project is one of Maine's eight regional domestic violence resource centers that provides free and confidential, critical, wrap-around services for survivors of domestic abuse and their children, as well as essential support, training, and information for community response systems. It is our mission to help meet the needs of victims and survivors of domestic, dating, and sexual abuse and violence and to work with the community to end this form of abuse in Aroostook County. In fiscal year 2024, we assisted 1038 victims, averaging 1 out of every 61 Aroostook residents. On average, victims have 1-3 children, meaning our support services impact at least 3000 people each year, 1 out of every 20 people in Aroostook.

Hope and Justice Project has 3 emergency shelters and 2 transitional houses. We maintain a 24-hour helpline, providing crisis intervention and safety planning. Advocates assist victims with civil legal court matters such as protection from abuse orders and family matters, housing navigation services, financial empowerment, and individual advocacy. For specialized services we have a child protection services/domestic violence liaison, an abuse in later life advocate, a systems change advocate, and a criminal justice system advocate (all of which are funded by competitive federal grants, separate from our Maine DHHS contract).

Historically, the state has not invested enough to support lifesaving services or fulfill the state's commitment to victims of domestic violence. At Hope and Justice Project (HJP), the share of services supported by the state general funds through the DHHS contract was 18% in FY24, with the total DHHS contract - federal and state funds combined - constituting 48% of our revenue. In the current fiscal year, which is an outlier due to the temporary general funds replacing the loss in federal VOCA dollars, the DHHS contract is 40% of our total revenue, and state general funds still only comprise 25% of our total agency budget, providing funding for 4.5 advocate salaries.

With current funding, not only are we unable to expand to meet the emergency needs in our community, but we are unable to even sustain all facets of our services, as we have been cutting back services in response to flat funding and increased costs for many years. All of our costs

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continue to rise—wages alone have increased 30% statewide. We put significant resources into raising other private or competitive grant funds, because we have to in order to supplement our state contract; but in the end, it is not enough. We have already made hard choices about what we can offer and who can receive it because we have cut staffing, reduced levels of assistance, and curtailed programs.

- **We have reduced our available outreach advocates.** This has impacted the available services to victims in the most rural areas of Aroostook, as we don't have capacity for staff to travel to meet with a victim who lacks transportation. This has caused increases in isolation and risks for victims due to delays in scheduling meetings. While applying for a protection order online is now available in Maine, it is unavailable to rural Mainers who do not have access to the internet. They rely on HJP's advocates to assist them in this process. This has also forced many survivors to stay longer with their abusive partners, as they have no means of leaving safely; **some survivors end up arriving at our offices after running through the woods and waiting for hours for a passerby to pick them up to escape their partners.**
- **We cut back on the amount of community education we provide.** This negatively impacts our ability to inform service providers and community members of the vital services we offer. We learned during our last survivor focus group that 100% of the survivors learned about HJP's services through other community service providers and that **100% would have left their abusive partners earlier if they knew about our services.** These cutbacks have also impacted our ability to provide training to other providers, such as the impacts of strangulation, stalking, and Maine's statutorily required ODARA training.
- **We no longer provide children's advocacy services in our three shelters.** Children's advocates would provide opportunities for survivors to take time to heal while their children receive safe care or education. These advocates would also be a safe person for children to speak with about their concerns and learn about healthy relationships. This was an important service to support resilience to the adverse childhood experiences these children are facing.
- **We closed one of our transitional houses.** This has decreased our ability to rapidly house survivors when leaving an abusive relationship.
- **Due to flat funding, staff salaries have not increased enough to compete with other organizations, causing an increase in staff turnover.** These losses have had a huge impact at HJP as we have lost experienced staff, and it takes about 1 year to fully train a

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person to provide proper vital advocacy. We have also lost community connections causing longer wait times for victims to receive other services and gaps in responses to victim's needs, creating more barriers for victims to safely leave their abusive partners.

To sum up the importance of HJP in the words of an anonymous survivor, "I've tried to connect with other organizations regarding this situation, and I had no luck with the DA's office, police, or anyone, but Hope and Justice Project answered when I called, called me back and showed up for me when no one else would." So, we are asking for this victim and for all Maine victims, that Maine do better. Please support LD 875 to ensure that critical domestic violence services remain available for survivors when they need us most. By doing so, you send a clear and consistent message that domestic violence has no home in our state and survivors of abuse deserve support.

Thank you.

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